

Free Agents Prosper In '79 Baseball Pacts

By MURRAY CHASS

The 22 free agents who have joined new teams in the last two months have signed contracts worth an unparalleled, guaranteed total of \$32 million, according to contract data obtained by The New York Times.

While Nolan Ryan, Houston's new pitcher, has the biggest of those contracts — a guaranteed \$3.5 million for three years and potentially \$4.5 million for four years — Rennie Stennett has perhaps the most interesting one. The new San Francisco second baseman got a five-year, \$3 million deal that was fattened by \$750,000 because the National League office wouldn't approve a particular contract provision.

The information, learned from management officials and agents, shows that club owners, who have often lamented the spiraling salaries, committed themselves to spending nearly

twice as much money on the first 22 players who signed in this market than on the first 22 who signed in last off-season's free-agent market.

A year ago the first 22 of the 32 who signed, including Pete Rose, agreed to guaranteed deals worth slightly more than \$17 million. After the 10 other free agents eventually signed, the total didn't reach \$20 million.

Twenty-two free agents — exactly half of this year's available group — remain unsigned, including Joe Morgan, Roy White, Ed Kranepool and Dock Ellis.

Of the 22 who have signed, three received contracts worth \$3 million or more (Ryan, Stennett and Los Angeles's Dave Goltz), and 11 others are guaranteed \$1 million or more.

Skip Lockwood of Boston has the potential to earn \$1 million or more, which would make 15 players in that category, one more than the previous high of 14 "millionaires" created in the first free-agent market in 1976. Ten players signed contracts worth \$1 million or more in each of the other two years.

While the baseball establishment follows the party line that the kind of money flowing into players' pockets the last couple of months is bad for baseball, Lockwood took another view.

"I think," the former Met relief

Continued on Page 6, Column 3

Unparalleled Year for Free Agents

Continued From Page 1

pitcher said, "the clubs have found they can sign players for a lot of money and they don't lose money. They make it back in attendance. Contrary to what they thought, free agency has turned out to be a tool that can be used to help baseball."

According to National League management and player sources familiar with Stennett's status with San Francisco, the league president, Chub Feeney, didn't help the Giants with his decision regarding a clause in Stennett's contract.

The sources said Tom Reich, Stennett's lawyer, and Spec Richardson, the Giants' general manager, had agreed to a clause that would have enabled the infelder to become a free agent again after three years.

At the same time, though, they negotiated an alternative to the clause because Mr. Reich had become wary of an increasing effort by league officials to curtail innovative contract provisions. The Giants agreed that if the free-agency provision were not approved, they would pay Stennett an additional \$750,000, raising the value of his already lucrative contract to an astounding \$3 million — astounding considering that the 28-year-old Panamanian broke his ankle two years ago and has batted .243 and .238 since then.

The league presidents approve or disapprove contracts. The Stennett contract with the free-agency clause was not sent to Feeney for his official approval.

"I did not submit a contract to the league office that was rejected," Richardson said. "I merely asked a question."

Although there's nothing in the basic agreement forbidding such a clause.

Feeney said he rejected the free-agency deal because the reserve system stipulates a five-year wait before a player can become a free agent again.

"You can make a contract with a player," Feeney said yesterday, "but not where it affects other clubs. The rights of other clubs cannot be signed away." If the Giants had been allowed to grant Stennett free-agent rights after only three years, the president added, "it would give them an unfair advantage over other clubs."

More than one of the sources suggested that Feeney acted at the direction of two Player Relations Committee officials, Ray Grebey, the director, and Barry Rona, the counsel. However, when Mr. Grebey was asked about the Stennett case, he said, "I am not familiar with that at all, not at all."

Yankees Had Approval Difficulty

On the other hand, the Yankees had some difficulty getting approval from President Lee MacPhail of the American League on their free-agent contracts with Bob Watson and Rudy May, and a Yankee official familiar with the situation said Mr. Rona had instigated MacPhail's action.

Mr. Grebey's labor counterpart, Marvin Miller, executive director of the Players Association, said he had no direct knowledge of the Stennett matter, but remarked, "If it's true, it puts Chub Feeney in the superstar category. The Giants consider Feeney worth \$750,000."

The Giants did not fight Feeney's decision. They simply adopted Plan B and made Stennett's contract a round \$3 million.

Mr. Reich, the Pittsburgh lawyer who also negotiated a \$1.4 million contract with the Giants for Milt May and a \$2,465,000 deal with California for Bruce Kison, declined to comment on

the Stennett situation specifically.

However, commenting generally, he spoke critically of the growing frequency with which the league presidents have been rejecting contract provisions.

"I have had a number of difficulties with provisions where I can see no justification for nonapproval," Mr. Reich said. "There have been many provisions that have been rejected or modified and it makes it more and more difficult to strike a deal."

"As they narrow the noneconomic issues, which they're doing, they're going to make the players more expensive. It's going to cost clubs more money. One of these days it's also going to cost a team a superstar because a deal between a team and a player will be blown apart."

New Agreement Sought

The Players Association, growing increasingly more displeased with the presidents' action on contract provisions, has proposed in the current labor negotiations with the owners that, in the future, copies of the contract simply be filed with the association and the league or commissioner's office — with no approval needed. Then if either side has a complaint about any provision, it can file a grievance.

"The proposal is aimed specifically at situations like this," Miller said, discussing the Stennett contract, "where unilaterally a league president and/or any of the characters from the Player Relations Committee office issues an offhand opinion, which more often than not has no basis in fact and is a misinterpretation of the basic agreement. Their whole method of dealing with this is surreptitious. They are not open and above board."

With Stennett's contract increased

by \$750,000, the Giants have guaranteed the three free agents they have signed a total of \$4,825,000. That total could reach \$5,113,750 if non-guaranteed salaries are included.

The \$32 million all teams have guaranteed the free agents they have signed becomes \$35 million if non-guaranteed salaries are included.

Dodgers the Biggest Spenders

The Giants are not the biggest free-agent spenders this time around. The Los Angeles Dodgers have signed Goltz, Don Stanhouse and Jay Johnstone for a total of \$5.4 million.

Only the California Angels have spent more in any one season for free agents — \$5.525 million in 1976 for Joe Rudi, Bobby Grich and Don Baylor.

The San Diego Padres signed Rick Wise and John Curtis for a total of \$3.75 million, which is \$500,000 more than they gave Rollie Fingers and Gene Tenace in 1976.

In 1976, the first year of free agency, 24 players signed contracts worth \$24,962,000. Based on the total number of years those contracts represented, the average annual income was \$260,229. This time that average is \$366,724, representing a 41 percent increase.